

Review of Robin Headlam Wells *Shakespeare on Masculinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). xi+249 pp. ISBN 0521 662044 £35.00

To be trendy Headlam Wells could have used the preposition "in" instead of "on" for his title, but this book is most determinedly not fashionable. Recent criticism has read Shakespeare and his contemporaries as symptomatic of their age, as the spoken not the speakers of its discourses, but Headlam Wells insists that Shakespeare had a point of view about masculinity which we can recover from his works. Initially Shakespeare had to tread carefully because Essex's attempt to subdue a rebellion in Ireland looked for a time likely to revive the macho chivalric ideal, so in *Henry 5* we see the engaging young hero only subtly undermined by structural and narratorial contradictions, such as the oft-noted anticlimax after each chorus. With Essex's downfall, Shakespeare was more free to dramatize in *Troilus and Cressida* and *Hamlet* the political danger posed by powerful young men with essentially pre-civilized notions of personal honour. In the martial heroes of *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Coriolanus* Shakespeare explored the dangerous tensions created by social ideals of martial manhood.

Headlam Wells's readings of the plays' engagement in a contemporary debate about heroism are exceptionally insightful and, unlike much recent work, entirely intelligible with a clear-sighted logic and refreshing contempt for blather. While Headlam Wells's play criticism could be read by intelligent A-level students through to undergraduates and their teachers, the final chapter ("Afterword: historicism and presentism") reflects rather more theoretically upon recent developments in historicist literary studies that misrepresent or ignore the scholarship of the mid-twentieth century while claiming its insights for itself. On the evidence of the readings here, Wells's kind of historicism will, on the other hand, remain useful for a long time indeed.

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277 words